

HUMAN SHIELD

REZAUR RAHMAN

Translated from the Bengali: MUNJULIKA RAHMAN



student leader Taleb, who is known for being an unscrupulous murderer, is looking for her. It was common knowledge that when Taleb sets his attention on a woman, she disappears within a few days.

Rashna was alarmed and pondering whether she should go home for the day, but Professor Ali's class was next so she decided to stay for that class period. At the end of class, Rashna was walking out of the classroom when Taleb appeared in front of her.

"You're Rashna?"
"Yes."
"I am Taleb. I wanted to talk to you. Come with me..."

By this time, Rashna's classmates noticed that Taleb was talking to Rashna, and they seemed to disappear within minutes, as if someone had hurled a stone at a flock of birds.

Rashna stood where she was, anxious and hesitant.

Taleb looked at her, and a faint smile spread across his mouth. At that moment, Rashna didn't sense any danger in the behavior and expression of this individual who is supposed to be a murderer. In his red and white striped t-shirt and jeans, he looked

Rashna suddenly heard one of her classmates shout, "Look that's Abedin! They're going to kill him!" Rashna turned to see a young man on the ground and recognized Abedin immediately. He was their batch-mate, an attentive and serious student who

like just another university student.

"You're afraid of coming with me?" he asked

Rashna didn't reply.

"Okay. We'll sit here and talk here then," he said as he nodded towards the chairs in the classroom. After Rashna slowly took a seat Taleb sat down and continued, "The incident that day...Abedin came out alive, but only because of you. He wasn't supposed to live. If I target someone, they don't escape. I am the leader of the official campus armed cadre of the ruling party. Campus violence begins and ends on my command. I arranged for Abedin's seat in the residence hall and made him a part of my group. But at the instigation of a teacher from our rival group, he joined their procession. He shouldn't have done that."

Taleb's mobile phone began to ring. He received the call, but kept it brief, and continued his conversation with Rashna. "Right when I was about to bring my machete down on him, I noticed your face. You look like my cousin Sakhina. Very similar. I couldn't bring myself to finish the job."

Taleb continued to tell her that he and his cousin had grown up together in a small village town, and when they were teenagers, they fell in love. Sakhina was a kind and warm person, and in Taleb's eyes, very beautiful. When Sakhina was in her last year of high school, a few miscreants from the local college began to pursue her. One day, while coming back from school, she disappeared. Two days later, they found her body, maimed and violated, a victim of gang rape. Taleb recounted that in grief and trauma, he had lost his ability to speak for some time. He somehow finished high school, and broken and demoralized, he left his village and came to Dhaka. That first day in this big city teeming with people, he decided he was going to take over the network of terrorism in Dhaka, feeling that by killing people mercilessly he could somehow avenge Sakhina's death. He enrolled at a small private college and got involved in student politics. When he finished his degree, he was admitted to the university through political considerations. He was soon involved in seven or eight murders, but those cases were the

responsibilities of his party. Taleb continued to tell Rashna that he could never forget the way Sakhina had been violated, and he knew that on his current path, a violent death was inevitable for him too. "So be it," he said to her with a melancholy smile.

He looked at Rashna, as if waking up from a reverie, and seemed embarrassed. "I guess I've said too much. When I talk about Sakhina, I lose myself. I hope you don't mind. I shouldn't have taken so much of your time. I'll have to leave now. Stay well, Rashna."

Taleb started to walk away as Rashna sat there watching him, but he turned towards her and came back. "By the way, if you face any problems on campus, let me know. I'll take care of it. Here, give me your cell phone..."

Rashna was taken aback and followed his instructions. He took her phone, saved his number and gave it back to her. "Whatever you need...okay? My number is saved as 'Killer,' so you remember," he said and smiled at her.

As Rashna walked to the bus stop, she considered the profound tragedy that lay behind the motivations of the terrorist leader Taleb, who is feared across campus. There was no doubt that he would also come to a brutal end, and strangely, Rashna felt sad at this thought.

While she was waiting for the bus, a young man came running towards her. Breathless, he said to her, "You're Rashna? I am Abedin's friend Mushfiqur. He's at Pongu Hospital. He has a bad fracture on his right leg."

The bus was here and Rashna had to get on board, but he continued in a rush, "Abedin would like to see you if it is possible for you to go to the hospital, he wants to express his gratitude. He is in your debt because you risked your life for him..." Before she got on the bus, Rashna quickly jotted down Abedin's hospital room number.

3. Dhamrai is not too far from Dhaka and since there are direct bus services, if one can get on a bus, which can be difficult because of the buses' mid-road stop, it's an otherwise easy commute. Abedin got into Dhaka University's English Department since he scored high marks in the entrance exam, and when classes started a few months ago, he began commuting to campus from Dhamrai, where he lived with his maternal uncle's family. At one point, he realized that he couldn't get too far in his career by only attending classes and doing well in exams. Abedin understood that to move ahead on campus and to advance in a future career, it was important to participate in social and political groups, cultural events, and even be present for *adda*.

Abedin discussed this with his maternal uncle, who was a teacher at Dhamrai College. The uncle discussed with Abedin's parents who lived in the village, and assured them that since Abedin was a merit scholar they will find a way to get Abedin a seat in the residential halls. Abedin could also support himself by tutoring younger students.

When Abedin went to the Provost's Office to apply for a seat at one of the residence halls, the clerical officer looked him up and down, adjusted his glasses, and asked, "Do you have connections to the Prime Minister's office, or someone influential to recommend you?"

Abedin was taken aback and while trying to grasp what the officer had just asked, he was pulled aside by a young man standing beside him. "You are new on campus? Oh, that's why! I don't have time right now, but come to room 38 in Dhaka Hall in the evening."

Between classes, Abedin asked a few of his classmates about securing a seat in the residence halls, and they all said he needs connections. "Nobody can give you a seat. You have to go through the right channel," one senior student advised. "Keep talking to people about it. You'll find the channel...more likely that the channel will find you. Where are you from?"

"Dhamrai," Abedin replied.

"Explains. You haven't figured out Dhaka's ways yet."

(To be concluded in the next issue.)

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You Can't Just Leave

SHARYAR SHAAMS

Tobias Wolff would like to think his first published novel, "Ugly Rumours", did not exist. It does not come up on any official list of his publications and his second, more widely known, novel, "Old School", when it came out first, was erroneously referred to as the "Debut Novel".

Wolff, however, is hardly the first one to be so embarrassed of his own early work as to take lengthy measures to erase its existence. Many had that tendency. Obviously though, being in the age as we are, it's pretty hard now to have someone forget something you put out thanks to the internet. And the dilemma isn't the availability of a work you do not want to be associated with under any circumstances, it's more about whether you "putting it out" means you lose the right to do so.

Getting, say, a novel published, means it's out there and you cannot "change" it in any manner anymore—this has been the case for the majority of cases. But to suppose that that event is where you have to draw the line is absurd because there have been instances when writers didn't. Gore Vidal routinely went back to his early novels and edited them—in one occasion, even changing the ending completely. Tennessee Williams edited after publication too. Nonfiction writers *have* to do it if a new fact arises that must be addressed and corrected. So in a sense you can and you are "disowning" portions of your work after you cross that line of 'putting it out'.

There will be people, however, claiming how partial disowning isn't the same as completely abandoning a book, which

reflects the temperament of the person during the time he wrote it. That's a facile argument to make because writers don't exactly publish something they just jot down without further consideration, unless they happen to be teenagers who think they'll be famous if they self-publish their crappy fantasy novel on amazon.com.

Counter-argument: but even after editing it reflects the temperament you had during a certain "period" of your life. But then you'd have to distinguish how long that period is supposed to be, don't you? And aren't there writers who change bits and pieces of their work so much it entirely becomes different than the kind of story they started with? What I'm trying to say is you do change or delete stuff all the time, sometimes entire chunks of stuff, and drawing the line at publication is something you *choose* to do, meaning you can, if you want to, deviate from that practice.

There has been writers like Rushdie, who isn't very fond of his first novel either, says how once you put something out it should be there. But we also have to understand that it is up to the writer if he wants to change or disown, say, a short story or a novel. He should be able to without being judged on how he "cannot be embarrassed of his own writing". Because writers can be.

If a writer does want to make his book not exist anymore, you just have to roll with it. However, if you manage to have a copy of that book the writer hates so much, and you spread the word about it and make that book famous which in turn extremely annoys the writer, then that's awesome too.



OUTSIDER

RUBAB ABDULLAH

Sometimes
I walk away from plights in my life
Sometimes hold up to ridicule the twilight
Here I walk on my own
Even in the cave of darkness
Inner eyes of me are lit up to see things,
In the light of the silvery Moon

One can reach one's journey's end
Being worldly wise not be meant for all
Many people call me outsider or sometimes
outcast
Love and peace they'll lose
For fame and gains
Fools are in mad rush.



“বিবেকের তীক্ষ্ণ দংশন সহ্য করতে না পেরেই তারাক্ষরের ১৯৭১ বইটি লেখা, পড়তে শুরু করলে শেষ না করে থামা যাবে না।”

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